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The world of infectious diseases is changing with disease organisms mutating to produce more virulent strains. Through international travel and food imports, our shores no longer protect us from disease organisms common to other parts of the world. Some infections, long thought conquered, such as tuberculosis, have returned. Antibiotic resistance is an ever increasing threat due to years of improper and over use.

The threat of an influenza pandemic or more exotic, newer diseases, such as SARS, remind us that we cannot completely depend on antibiotics and antivirals to prevent or lessen the spread of infection. However, we still have effective weapons against infectious diseases in our arsenal. Surprisingly, these weapons include tried-and-true practices we often learned as children, such as washing your hands, staying home when you are sick, and sneezing and/or coughing into your sleeve.

- ***Wash your hands***

Health care providers and infection control professionals have long known that hand washing is the single most important means to preventing infection. Despite this fact, studies show that people are not washing their hands effectively.

How hands are washed is very important. In general, antimicrobial products are not required; soap and water are adequate. Hand sanitizers are acceptable for hands that are not visibly soiled in the absence of hand washing facilities. It is important to remember, however, that hand sanitizers are not effective against all microorganisms, such as *Norovirus*, and debris will remain on the hands, since the sanitizer is not washed away.

At a minimum, hands should be washed:

- After using the restroom
- After diapering a child or assisting a child to use the restroom
- After caring for someone who is ill
- After cleaning soiled areas
- After coughing or sneezing into hands or using facial tissues
- Before and after preparing food

- ***Stay home when you are sick***

In today's work-a-day world, many people who are ill will "tough it out" and go to work anyway, if nothing else to avoid the mountain of e-mails and phone calls after an absence. Some may face loss of salary or repercussions from management if they miss work due to illness. Children often attend school or child care settings when ill in order not to miss certain events or because parents or guardians must go to work. Health care providers can ease these situations by providing verification to employers or school officials that an individual should stay home and when the individual may return to work, school or child care, being mindful of Indiana public health laws stipulating return to work following certain infections.

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Reminding people that they not only endanger their own health by working or attending school or child care when ill but they also endanger the health of others is critical. Many outbreaks in workplaces, schools, and child care settings result from individuals attending work, school, or child care while ill, causing unnecessary disease, absence, and health care costs.

- **Sneeze and/or cough into your sleeve**

As children, when we sneezed or coughed, most of us heard the admonishment, “Cover your mouth!” This usually meant covering your mouth with your hands when you coughed or sneezed, then freely touching everything else in sight, including other people’s hands. Most children do not readily wash their hands, or hand washing facilities or sanitizers may not be available. What to do?

Cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve. Mucus droplets laden with disease-causing organisms are released into fabric, rather than onto skin, where they soon dry and any microorganisms die or become inert. In addition, these microorganisms are not deposited onto hands, where they are quickly transferred to other objects, eyes, nose, or mouth. Reminding people to avoid touching eyes, nose or mouth with fingertips is also important.

As a health care provider you have a unique opportunity to educate your patients about these simple, yet effective measures. They don’t cost anything, they don’t encourage antimicrobial resistance or genetic mutation, and they can be practiced anywhere at anytime by individuals of all age groups, genders, and backgrounds. They can be used with mundane or exotic diseases, and may well be our best defenses against those infections that have no pharmaceutical measures. Moreover, they are concrete steps that individuals can take to protect their own health and safety, not only giving them a sense of control with their personal health but also the health of the community. That is priceless.